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ABSTRACT

This paper reports and analyzes data related to the governance of charter schools. The report focuses on recent reform movements in charter schools, analyzing these schools' strengths and weaknesses. For the study, 531 questionnaires were sent to all charter school directors listed in the 1996/1997 Charter School Directory and to randomly selected new member directors identified in the 1997/1998 Charter School Directory. A total of 180 questionnaires were returned. Demographic data show that 60 percent of charter-school students were white, 17 percent were African-American, 4 percent were Asian, 11 percent were Pacific Islander, 19 percent were Hispanic, and 2 percent were other. Among the findings, 34 percent of respondents indicated that legal services were available, and 29 percent reported the availability of training programs in the state. In regards to discipline, many charter schools do not follow the same discipline procedures as those followed by the local school district. Study participants reported concerns that were clustered around four basic areas: the lack of acceptance of charter schools as full partners, the lack of support by local districts of charter schools, the lack of research-based practices, and the scarcity of startup support. Another major concern was the tepidness of local support for charter schools. (Contains 11 references.) (RJM)

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# Charter School Governance

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Abstract

This study reports and analyzes data related to the governance of charter schools. Additionally, the authors share findings related to a national review of states' certification standards that are to be in effect in the 1999/2000 school term.

The respondents to the charter school study have revealed the importance of governance in the charter school setting. The reflections shared by the authors should have an immediate and positive impact on educational practices in charter schools and non-charter public schools. The recommendations offered may be used to enhance the involvement of stakeholders in the educational process.

When A Study of Charter School Governance (Borsa and Ahmed, 1998) was completed, the authors' skepticism about the potential success of the school reform movement was heightened. Much like an army stretches beyond its replenishing supplies, charter schools have moved too quickly away from the management training, certification standards, and reliance upon partnerships that include in-service, legal, and financial assistance.

In an attempt to determine how far afield charter schools were and to gain a comprehensive and up-to-date understanding of the requirements needed to work in America's schools, an additional investigation was conducted to obtain the desired information. In A National Study of Principal Certification Standards ( Borsa and Ahmed 1999), each state was asked for certification standards that would be in place in their state beginning school term 99/2000. Eight graduate students and the authors of the study reviewed the certification standards.

In part, the study indicated that with the exception of a minority of states there continues to be disparity between charter school requirement and best practice as well as state certification standards. If state charters allow for charter schools to relax standards below the state standards, which appear on the whole to be minimal, then the fate of charter schools may be sealed.

The importance of the application of standards and best practice concepts is evident in a number of reports. In a recently published Public Interest article, Chester Finn (1998) discussed charter schools along with other "new forms of schooling." Particular attention was given to the concern of public authorities that charter schools demonstrate an increase in student achievement. Finn's reflections highlight the need for

charter school directors to execute those highly recognized practices in teacher supervision that lead to enhanced performance on the part of teachers and increased academic achievement by students.

Concerns regarding the academic achievement of students attending charter schools were demonstrated by the evaluation design of Colorado's legislation related to such schools. Among the three criteria used to evaluate its charter schools, the Colorado Department of Education has identified one criteria related directly to achievement. Specifically, the Department provided evaluators of charter schools with the following prompt: "Do charter school students attain high levels of learning and achievement?" This particular requirement accentuates the importance of evaluation activities.

The issue of academic achievement is again highlighted in a headline story from the Chicago Sun-Times which indicates that "charter schools [are] not passing --yet." (Rossi, 1998, p. 1). Of concern to the author is the report that Chicago's charter schools "produced smaller test gains than did Chicago public schools the previous year with the same kids" (p. 1). Since student academic performance is not yet at expected levels in the identified schools, there is a need to provide faculty with the supervision and skills necessary to inform and improve their practices as teachers.

In addition to the reports related to academic deficiencies involving charter schools, one hears and reads regular news reports related to charter schools and problems with management training, certification standards, and reliance upon partnerships that include in-service activities, legal consultation, and financial assistance.

## Purpose of the Study

Because of the concerns noted above and because of the rapid growth of the charter school movement throughout the nation, a study was conducted by the authors to examine the condition of this most recent reform movement. The strengths and weaknesses observed in presently operating charter schools will assist the community of learners in identifying effective practices to incorporate in existing and planned charter schools.

## Methodology

Questionnaires were sent to all of the charter school directors listed in the 1996/1997 Charter School Directory and to randomly selected new member directors identified in the 1997/1998 Charter School Directory. The following states were represented in the study: California, Alaska, Texas, Kansas, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Connecticut. These states were the only ones with existing charter schools at the time the study was conducted.

Of the five hundred thirty-one questionnaires sent, one hundred eighty questionnaires (34.4%) were returned. This final return percentage represents surveys gathered from the first mailing, surveys received from respondents to a subsequent mailing to non-respondents, responses from randomly selected members listed in the most recent Charter School Directory and responses via direct personal contact of directors who had not responded to earlier attempts. Final returns were furthermore impacted by the fact that a number of schools had closed or moved since the publication of the Charter School Directory.

It should also be noted that charter school directors had the opportunity to reply in the traditional manner of returning the completed hard copy questionnaire or they could have responded by electronic mail (e-mail). Only a miniscule percentage of the respondents selected the e-mail mode of response. The e-mail component was selected as an alternative because of the increasing use of this technology in research and in practice. Some respondents indicated that they did not respond by e-mail because they did not have access to Internet facilities in their locations. The fact that so few utilized this manner of response may have major implications for future research. It may also speak to the level of technology used in the nation's charter schools.

**Demographic Data**

Demographic inquires indicated that 60% of the charter school students were White, 17% were African-American, 4% were Asian, 11% were Pacific Islander, 19% were Hispanic and 2% were Other. The question related to the setting of the charter school revealed the following: 32% urban, 19% suburban, 27% small town, and 22% rural.

Sixty-six percent of the respondents had public school experience, twenty-three percent had worked in a private school and eighteen percent had no experience working in either a public or private school.

In terms of years of experience in the profession, seventy-seven percent said that they had worked in the field for six or more years, twelve percent had five or fewer years in education and eleven percent failed to respond to the question.

Participants were also asked about courses they may have taken in educational administration and/or supervision. 21% had taken three to nine hours in administration

and supervision, 6% had taken ten to eighteen hours, 10% had taken nineteen to twenty-eight hours, 14% had twenty-nine to thirty eight hours, 7% had thirty-nine to 48 hours, and 22% had forty-nine plus hours in administration and supervision.

## Summary of Findings

The data presented here represent the responses specifically related to governance issues involving: legal services, training in the management of schools, the establishment of charter schools, support of charter schools, assistance from local districts in: discipline, personnel issues, special education, gifted, governance, budget, and staff development.

Additional data examine demographics such as preparation for administration and supervision, experience in teaching, and certification requirements.

### Legal Services

When asked specifically about the availability of or use of legal services provided by the local district thirty-four percent of those surveyed indicated that legal services were available while sixty-six percent reported that such assistance was not available.

### Training in the Management of Schools

Twenty-nine percent of the respondents reported training programs available through the state. Seventy-one percent said that the state did not offer charter school training programs.

In a similar question sixty percent of the participants in this study reported that there were opportunities available for further training while forty percent indicated that there were no such opportunities available.

### The Establishment of Charter Schools

In response to the question regarding of training in the establishment and management of charter schools, directors indicated that such a program was in place for twenty-nine percent of their sites while seventh-one percent of their colleagues said that no such services were accessible in their setting.

**Discipline**

There appears to be a very large number of schools that do not follow the same discipline procedures as those followed by the local school district. Fifty-eight percent of the charter school respondents reported that they do follow similar discipline procedures as opposed to forty-two percent of the respondents who said they do not.

**Special Education**

Special education students are represented in eighty-seven percent of the locations reporting. Thirteen percent of the schools do not have special education students enrolled.

**Certification Requirements**

Sixty-one percent of the reporting schools indicated that their state charter did not require teacher certification. Thirty-nine percent reported that teacher certification was a state requirement.

**Support from the Local District**

The respondents indicated that, for the most part, they do not receive significant assistance from their home school district. The percentages listed below demonstrate the level of support articulated by the participants.

| **Level of Program Support from Local District** | |
|---|---|
| **Program** | **Charter Schools Reporting Support** |
| Discipline | 16% |
| Personnel | 29% |
| Special Education | 45% |
| Gifted Education | 14% |
| Governance | 14% |
| Budgeting | 29% |
| Staff Development | 28% |

## Additional Demographic Issues

### Preparation for Administration and Supervision

Twenty-two percent of the respondents reported having taken forty-nine or more hours in educational administration and supervision. Twenty-one percent said that they had taken as few as three to nine hours in educational administration and supervision.

### Experience in Teaching

Seventy-two percent of the questionnaire respondents have been in education for six or more years. In terms of employment history, sixty-six percent report that they had public school experience.

## Analysis of Findings

An analysis of the data reveals that concerns are clustered around four basic areas: the lack of acceptance of charter schools as full partners in the education of local area children; the lack of support by local districts of charter schools; the lack of researched-based practices; and scarcity of start-up support.

It appears as if the territorial battles continue to rage between school districts and the reform-minded "new kid on the block" - charter schools. School districts seem reluctant to recognize the valuable role charter schools can play in the education of children. As a relatively independent entity, school districts have the propensity to protect their interest by excluding "intruders." This action increases the strain that exists between the local educational agency and the emerging charter schools.

Another major concern is the extent to which school districts support the creation and execution of charter schools. The participants in this study indicated that local support was almost non-existent. Issues such as staff development, special educational services, and discipline policies and procedures were left to be addressed, almost in isolation, by district sponsored charter schools. Instead of providing the directors of the emerging schools with the opportunity the accept or reject local policies, local districts generally excluded their partners from such involvement.

Charter schools, as evidenced by this study, had a tendency to reject what has been accepted as "best practice" or what was been reported in the literature as effective. In the desire to promote the theory of "lesser is better," advocates of this latest approach to reform American schools seem not to want to subscribe to the guidance offered by researchers and practitioners alike. Listening to and/or adapting the advice offered could

assist the directors/sponsors of charter schools from making the same mistakes being warned against by experienced practitioners.

Commentators on educational change, like Michael Fullan, share how difficult change is. Local school boards, in the main, have not been major players in providing charter schools with "start-up" support. The participant in this study suggested that little or no help was given them in the development of their charter schools. It's almost as if local school boards are saying "Why provide support to our enemy? Why help those who are taking our money, resources, and children?" This phenomenon exacerbates the already strained relationship evident between the two entities.

## Recommendations

**Recommendation 1**

State charter schools statutes should identify and set standards that reflect best practice in teaching, learning, and in the management of schools.

**Recommendation 2**

Local school districts and charter schools should begin working collaboratively in trying to address their mutual mission – the education of OUR children.

**Recommendation 3**

Because of the litigious nature of society and the interference it can cause in the education of children, local school districts should remember their legal responsibility to the parents of a charter school student and provide a setting in which legal concerns can be mutually addressed.

**Recommendation 4**

Schools of education should become actively involved in the charter school movement by serving as a conduit of best practices for those wishing to initiate or direct a charter school.

## Conclusion

From its legislative inception in the 1990's the charter school movement has been seen as an educational reform designed to have a positive impact on educational programs. The multitude of designs approved by granting agencies (state governments, universities, school districts etc.) speaks to the desire of proponents to permit innovations, with few restrictions, that will make a difference in student growth/development and in governance.

The schools given a charter have the opportunity to create an educational and governance program designed to accommodate that which is seen as innovative and effective. In order to maximize the potential of their schools, charter school directors must take into account those ideas and concepts identified in the literature that will assist a school in meeting it goals and objectives.

School governance continues to be an area of discussion among politicians, the media, the public and educators. Various formats of educational reform options are currently being applied to change traditional governance. Privatization, vouchers, site-based management, and charter schools are being touted as the remedy for the ailing schools. Any reform is extremely difficult, and this is particularly true for charter schools.

Numerous commentators on educational change have emphasized the difficulty of departing from the norm without support and training. State and local agencies responsible for the approval and development of charter schools must take heed to the advice offered in the literature on educational reform. In listening to such counsel, the "powers that be" should initiate a "loose coupling" arrangement that would permit the charter school and the sponsoring agency (and state office of education) to work collaboratively to meet the needs identified in the mission of the charter schools.

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